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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

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Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Reimann, B. W. (1986). The defeat of the German universities 1933. *Historical Social Research*, 11(3), 101-105.
<https://doi.org/10.12759/hsr.11.1986.3.101-105>

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current research

THE DEFEAT OF THE GERMAN UNIVERSITIES 1933

Bruno W. Reimann(*)

Abstract. The German universities still have difficulties when they approach their history from 1933 to 1945. Prevailing over attempts at a critical reexamination are interpretations which downplay the significance of, or even ignore or repress this history. In lofty commemorative volumes one can learn much about brilliant periods of science and scholarship, but only little or nothing about the darkest phase in the history of the German university. What lies at the root of this difficulty in dealing with its own past? The university would be shaken in its self-regard if it should turn out that institutions of higher learning were not simply subjugated through acts of coercion by National Socialism, but rather that in 1933 a process of "Selbst-Gleichschaltung"(1) (K.D.Bracher) took place, that is, a process of voluntary cooperation with an assimilation into the National Socialist machinery of state and power. This self-regard would furthermore be shaken if it were to be shown that the universities held the ideological stirrup for National Socialism - that they could hold this stirrup because of certain scientific and political traditions, which they (still or once again) uphold today.

In dealing with the period in question, many of the older accounts, especially the "official" or "quasi-official" university historiographies, show a tendency to trivialize or down-play the response of the universities to National Socialism. What is emphasized in these accounts is above all the aspect of coercion from without: National Socialism supposedly inundated, as it were, the completely apolitical universities. From this perspective, precursors of National Socialism did not exist within academia; there were no traditions or dispositions which might effect a vehement voluntary cooperations with the system. Frequently, this subject was not dealt with at all at the institutional level, but was treated rather as a problem of the individual persons concerned. The main agents of the "brown university" were thus said to be a few lesser-known scholars. All this would exonerate the university, whose self-image has always rested on the tradition of Humboldt, who based his idea of the university on the principles of freedom and self-determination. Reference to the brown student movement fulfills a similar exonerative function. This student movement was indeed a driving

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force at the universities, but it actually only picked up in crude form from what had been heard for years in the speeches of professors and university presidents.

Critical attempts at a reexamination are documented in the series of published lectures which took place in the sixties at the universities of Tübingen, Munich and Berlin. Similar initiatives (lectures, exhibits, publications) were taken in recent years at the universities of Tübingen, Bielefeld and Giessen.

National Socialism did not simply impose itself on the universities from the outside, as a politically repressive disciplinary action. Rather, it met up with a variety of political, ideological, social and scientific intellectual currents which accommodated it. Beside the many nationalistically inclined professors who joined the National Socialist movement for decidedly ideological reasons, there were certainly also groups of followers whose political naiveté most likely played a role. It has as yet been difficult to assess to what extent sheer opportunism was a motivating factor in active assimilation and complaisant conformity. The following dates show the extension of the self-imposed conformity of professors and university institutions:

March 5, 1933: In an election proclamation, 300 professors support National Socialism and Adolf Hitler.

April 3, 1933: The League of German Universities objects "with indignation and vehement protest to the totally unfounded atrocity stories from abroad."

April 12, 1933: The Conference of University Presidents sets up a committee to establish the "more intensive assimilation (of universities) into the community of the people."

June 1933: The newly elected board of directors of the University league declares its "unreserved" allegiance "to the National Socialist world view" in a declaration signed with "Heil Hitler!".

November, 1933: "Declaration of German Sciences" in Leipzig. Well known scientists and scholars such as Sauerbruch and Heidegger support an "appeal to the educated people of the world", which courts understanding for the politics of the National Socialists.

In the same month, 700 of the approximately 2,000 professors affirm their "loyalty ... to Adolf Hitler and the National Socialist State."

THE UNIVERSITY LEAGUE

The process of "Selbst-Gleichschaltung", of self-imposed uniformity with the National Socialist system, is most clearly illustrated by the politics of the League of German Universities. This League, which saw itself as an elite association, was not, to be sure, a constitutional body of the university. It was, nevertheless, the crucial professional organization serving the interests of the professors. Founded in 1920 as a counterweight to the new political trends in Germany, it immediately renounced democracy and its "party squabbles", declaring the "impartial powers of the old state" to be

the absolute models of political order. The League of German Universities represented the predominant index of political consciousness at the universities. Although it considered itself free of "political bias in any direction", it was in reality a mouthpiece of the old forces, which continued to play the idea of the strong, militant, national State against the fragile reality of the Republic.

With its statement of March 21, 1933, this very League ushered in the universities' self-imposed uniformity with National Socialism. The National Socialist seizure of power was hailed as a "rebirth of the German people", providing the framework in which the universities could develop "their spirit from the inner unity of the collective German soul." By expressly reaffirming in this statement the politicizing of science and scholarship in the sense of the "collective national will", the League made itself a mouthpiece for politicizing the universities in the interest of National Socialism. With astonishing argumentational acrobatics, great traditions of the university and names which characterized them (Humboldt, Schleiermacher, Hegel) are linked in one breath to the "spirit" of the times, and to the opportune "reform" of the university. The guiding principles of this "reform" are seen in "willingness to serve in the national defense", "labour-service", "settlement training", "military sport", and "protection of national borders". While the first wave of dismissals of Jewish, liberal, and critically inclined professors was underway - by the Winter Semester of 1934/35 approximately 1.145 professors, or about 14 percent of all university faculty, were dismissed, the League boasted in its declaration of April 21, 1933, the choice selection of teachers according to the "nobility of race and mind".

These hasty declarations of loyalty (corresponding views were expressed in that same year by many eminent scholars) must be viewed against the background of the cooptation of various other social institutions by the National Socialists. This was of course threatening to the universities. Yet what was achieved by their acts of voluntary submission? In the face of cooptation which threatened to be imposed from the outside, the universities hastened to adapt. What occurred was a kind of "obedience in advance", yet the final result was the same. One evil was combated with a worse one.

MOTIVES OF SELF-IMPOSED UNIFORMITY

National Socialism fused with various social systems and domains. Their individual histories reveal them to have been precursors of National Socialism. Together they form a history of foreseeable disaster. Not only did the total historical situation and the phenomena of big business, the middle classes and socio-psychological factors play a role. There were forerunners to the National Socialists within the educated bourgeoisie, the student body and faculty at the universities. Harbingers of National Socialist thought were evident as well within the history and argumentational logic of individual academic disciplines. Without these precursors it would not be possible to understand the vehement and almost unresisted penetration of National Socialism into the realm of the university at a time when it was not imposed by force from above. One must recall that in the first weeks after the seizure of power, no scholar, no institution was forced into addresses of submission or ideological conformity.

Although the facts concerning this self-imposed uniformity with the system are undisputable, one can presume that the majority of professors who were left at the universities after the dismissals were not convinced supporters of National Socialism. Most of these professors were nationalistic, championed the idea that national policy serve to advance the national interest through the exercise of power, and more or less openly rejected the Weimar Republic and the democratic form of state. At the turning point of 1932/33, they had a rather cautious, but by no means negative attitude towards National Socialism, and saw in it something like an ally in the framework of a militant national policy. One would soon cure it of its coarse manners. After the seizure of power, the professors were publicly reproached (as they were, for example, on one occasion by Minister of Culture Rust) for this wavering wait-and-see attitude. In 1933, when one could still harbor illusions as to the results and "costs" of the new regime, they supported and furthered National Socialism, or at least put up with it. Although there certainly were considerable differences between the nationalistically inclined professors and the National Socialists concerning the form of political action, the substantial ideological affinities which temporarily brought them together should not be overlooked.

How did the current political slogans look in the minds of so many professors? Foremost in their thinking was the political dream of the strong nation state. This corresponded to the reverence for the military, the fostering of the frontline fighter myth, the romanticizing of military action. History was understood as an irrational life current, in which the will to power is decisive and the right of the stronger holds sway. Not the principle of reasoned argument, of rational accounting for moral and political decisions was to be at the center of politics, but rather a direct and immediate hearkening to and awareness of the historical mission, whose bearer was then perceived to be the "Führer". The fetishism of might and of the military was accompanied by an ethic of sacrifice, which was also constantly drummed into the students. Thus Langemarck, where thousands of patriotically inspired German youth had marched to their death at the onset of World War I, was the symbol of nationalistic militancy and unquestioning sacrifice.

What differentiated the academic variant of this ideological repertoire from the political agitation of the National Socialists was the polished form in which the armament of consciousness was effected. The influence such reasoning had on the students must have been substantial. At the universities the professors created the spiritual and intellectual fertile soil in which National Socialism could thrive.

ILLUSORY AUTONOMY

In the time of National Socialism, the universities revealed themselves to be politically and morally corruptible institutions. This corruptibility was evident in the process of self-imposed uniformity long before the state terror became effective from above. This cannot be viewed merely as a matter of individual failings. The causes lie in the faulty design and structural defects of the universities in the 19th century. They were not, in fact, the autonomous institutions conceived by Humboldt, but rather State universities, schools run by the State in the service of the State. The autonomy they claimed remained a mere illusion: the universities were in fact places

of national politicizing. Their members were highly educated public servants, at times so nationalistic as to be on the verge of voluntarily abandoning reason. Whatever did not comply with this constellation of delusion was warded off. One should not lose sight of the fact that during the Kaiser's regime, Social Democrats were barred from careers in institutions of higher learning. This discrepancy between the cloudy claim of autonomy and the subjugation of the "solid majority" to the idea and reality of the militant national state became clearly and unmistakably evident in 1933. With the voluntary relinquishment of its autonomy, the German university suffered its hitherto most severe and far-reaching defeat. It became clear in 1933 to what extent the idea of the autonomous university was based upon preconditions which did not exist, and which could not be created. With the collapse of National Socialism, these deficiencies, this inadequate ability to realize the claim to autonomy, raised acute doubts as to the idea and reality of the old university. The university after 1945 failed to examine critically the historical crisis and the historical defeat of the idea of the university. It perceived the "brown university" as a mere episode with no origins, and believed itself capable of simply attaching itself once again to 19th century traditions. If, however, the idea of autonomy is to prove itself as the life principle of science and scholarship, it can do so only through continuous discussion and reflection of its vulnerabilities, of its preconditions which are threatened from within and without.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 "Selbst-Gleichschaltung" means a voluntary alignment, a self-imposed uniformity of the universities with the political system.

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